

“Age-ing to Sage-ing”

The Challenges and Gifts in Life After Sixty

Has Western Society created a monster or an unprecedented opportunity?

Sermon Thoughts

I am 77 and I am aging. I have wanted to deny it.

Ten years ago, when I closed the doors to my office in Washington, DC and Roger & I moved to MV, Peg, my daughter, asked me to join her in a research project about peoples' experience of retirement -- my first thought, though not verbalized, was “I am not interested in retirement or being retired; never”, though the joy of working with my daughter provided the answer -- “Yes, I'd like to!” We sought volunteers 60 or older who would write about their Experience of Being Retired and published our findings in the book, “Elderscence.”-The Gift of Longevity” Little did I appreciate at the time that this endeavor would lead me into an awareness of a new stage of life I was entering--elderhood. The research and interviews gave me the background to eventually have the courage to look at my own aging, contemplate aging, the aging that I tried to ignore, and to finally honor it. Thank you Peg.

I became the first respondent to answer our research question. - - Here are a few of my thoughts, some initial; some that developed over time :

“It is a battle between old established patterns of life and the wished-for, fantasized new life...free, self indulgent, reflective, with endless time to muse, read, and be a different person. My impatience would be gone!...I had wanted time to see if I had a soulI just felt a questiing...I wanted to explore my inner world ...but there are distractions....Maybe it is a balance between my need to search, and enjoyment to be in this world.” I feel “betwixt and between,” believing I was really only fifty , but then I was convinced I was old.

“I must provide a new structure for myself...that brings excitement...the possibilities are many, the limits are real, yet were not defeating. I think of my unfinished business and the real impermanence of my life on Earth. I feel an urgency ... When I step back and muse, I see many paradoxes that contribute to feeling “betwixt and between.” This is a glorious time, a time of freedom from the stresses of making money, raising a family ...and a difficult time., a time of change. I feel so involved and yet detached. I am more with myself than ever, and so present at times.. I see the beauty and marvel of life, and the horrors of humankind's anger. I see how little I really know.”

The physical aging process can be an assault on who we think we are.

Three years ago, when I really looked in the mirror and witnessed all my wrinkles, I faced the struggle with shame, pain, and then an attempt to accept my aging. The shame came from my family's message that one must look perfect, with no defects; and wrinkles were surely defects.

Recently I saw a full face photo of Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor in Newsweek Magazine. Do look at it! She was beautiful, ..and with all her wrinkles. If she can honor her aging ... maybe I can too. Her picture now stands by my desk. And this confession helps! This was the beginning of a new sense of freedom, giving up formalities, and giving up my vanity, allowing a changing sense of self, of values, and interests....focusing on an evolving new one, arousing a decided shift in my consciousness, and accepting the reality of aging. These transitions of life's afternoons are more mysterious than those of the morning. Aging can be a time of reflection, as Peg Freyberg has recorded in her book, "Growing Up In Old Age" where she describes, in her seventies, courageously, her quest for meaning, by asking, "What is my authentic self? "In order to face being old with reasonableness and courage, I needed to disempower my fears." She's another hero of mine here on the Island - at age 99!

I picked a profession that made me look at myself, and yet this stage has offered more of an honest reflection than through all of my various therapy journeys; it has brought a compassionate feeling toward my mother, and a deep sense of incorporation of "Loving Kindness," thanks to the Buddhist message and the meditation practice offered by Jo Rice.

In a sense, this stage is like adolescence, where there can be a crisis of self-definition. Who am I now? We elders must be actively involved in this new struggle for self definition, knowing we are unique, valuable, and can make a difference.

I have become a passionate advocate for aging. I believe growing old represents a major social challenge in our modern era. It is a profound time of life. The 20th century was so demeaning for the elders in our country. Mandatory retirement was instituted in the early 1900s and the elders were told, "retire, retreat, and die." No kind words like Dylan Thomas's -- "Go gently into the night."

The present gift of longevity has given us 20 to 30 more years of life, and modern medicine helps us deal more effectively with some of our ills ...we represent 36 million or 13% now of our population, and in 2030 we will be 70 million. We have the numbers - and we must have a voice. We have so much experience, and so many wise thoughts from our long life - to offer our society and ourselves. Jung saw later life as a time to express one's uniqueness as an individual.

I see two obstacles, or hindrances to the future of this longevity gift: 1) Ageism, which is the prejudice that stereotypes and discriminates against older persons simply based on their age. and 2) Our fear and anxiety about our own mortality.

In 1968 Dr. Robert Butler coined the word "Ageism", saying that age discrimination was no longer a subtle attitude but a recognized social policy, negatively stereotyping old citizens as frail, senile, wrinkled, frightening, childlike, helpless, and miserable. He pronounced it as a disease requiring a cure. It is now seen as the "ultimate prejudice, the cruelest rejection." It is deeply ingrained, and appears in many forms.

A year or so ago our Vineyard Gazette reprinted an article written by Garson Kanin (play writer and theatrical director, husband of Ruth Gordon, who lived on Martha's Vineyard.)... .

"Of all the dangerous and destructive 'isms' that plague us, Ageism is the most stupid, demoralizing our people, weakening our system, depleting our energy, feeding our depression, wasting our experience, betraying our democracy, and blowing our brains."

And demeaning stories and humor are very present today.....Example

On March 30th of this year we heard on the Bill Maher (Mahr) TV show the following ageist comment made by Actor and comedian D. L. Hughley "John McCain is 73 years old or something. The only thing I want a 70 year old to do is f.....up traffic in Florida, or greeting me at WalMart. If your birthday got a one, nine, four - anything, you should be taking a nap. I am not saying he hasn't a right to a viable life. He has lost all credibility!"

Do I look like I've lost credibility??

Look around, and listen -- Let's be honest; many of us have abhorred aging, approached it with dread. -- Let's face the abhorrence. What is it about? Let's taste it. Let's talk about it. We have to face the prejudices and refuse to internalize the stereotypes society has imposed on us.

We have to define the difference between senescence and elderescence!! We see ageism on our Island, and we have to confront it, understand what motivates it in ourselves, and reject it! We have a love affair with the new, and want to discard the old. There is a preciousness of each moment of life and each event for all of us. We need to understand ageism for we will all, one day, age. The boomers turning 60 have begun to decry being set aside as old..all this will be explored further next week..in the service entitled-"The Experience, The Attitude, The Prejudice."

When I was 12 years old I watched my father come home from work, fall into bed, start to turn many colors, dark and blue, and gasp his last breath...This was my first experience with death. It was unreal - and then so frightening to accept. Until my serious life review, I always thought I had to panic when a family member became sick; I had to pray, and stay vigilant and anxious.

Recently, ..as I can began to accept my own inevitable death, I said I can give up what I cannot control. The world looks so wide and inviting and yet I know I am dying. Through this journey in confronting my aging I can understand the wise sages who say,.. "Living life in fear of death is losing it." Maybe some day we may develop a voice that lets us even choose our endings.

Just prior to his 70th birthday Jung had a severe heart attack. At 67 he had written... "I can scarcely keep pace and must watch out that the creative forces do not chase me round the universe at a gallop...."

Three years later, after recovering from the heart attack, he wrote -- "The vision of the end of all things gave me the courage to understand new formulations, surrender myself to the current of my own thoughts...an unconditional 'Yes' to that which 'is'." He believed that his new thoughts came not from the ego, but from a deeper source, the archetypal wisdom of the ages.

My spiritual quest has been so important over these last years....finding a meaning greater than my personal life.

In reading about aging I was drawn to the phrase-- "Conscious aging" first coined by Jung,-- which meant assigning dignity and honor to the process of aging as a spiritual questing. It is often used today to signify a process of becoming aware of one's existence, conscious of one's feeling, thinking, and sensing; being mindful, awakened to one's inner thoughts and outer awareness. For those who can tame the ego drive, an apprenticeship in exploration of wisdom can begin. Step back and revisit our sense of purpose. For me, its message is beautiful and joyous, telling me to take responsibility for my own life.... A time to reflect and revisit my personal self and really evaluate what is personally meaningful to me.

A present day hero in this quest for joy and meaning in aging is Rabbi Zalman Schachter, who has expanded this concept to what he calls Age-ing to Sage--ing, and that is where I got the title for this talk. He says, "I wish for all of us to experience a conscious transit to the wider life....This life stage is about completion, preparing for death, transmitting wisdom into the culture, deepening our connections and our perceptions and exploring the meaning of life...It is a tremendously new domain to map." Conscious aging is a process into which one grows, a harvesting of your life.

In the words of David Gutman, in "Reclaimed Powers" "Elderhood does not only bring loss, it also brings liberation." "When you are willing to grow up without fear that you are old, you can give up the adult values that block wisdom..because wisdom is seeing through illusions.. wisdom gives direction and purpose. We have to enlist the elders...to help and guide a crafting of new myths to our culture....

The people Peg and I interviewed for our book were all wonderful souls and, in ending, I will share a few of the thoughts from one of these remarkable people. This was a 73 year old man when we communicated with him, who had been a priest until 30, then completed a doctorate in theology and then a doctorate in psychology, married, and at the time of our talk with him was teaching psychology in Boston.

He had felt a decided shift in his feelings and focus after a heart attack at age 67. He says, "what ever happened in the 'twilight zone', I now see death as positive, not an absolute ending". An inner confidence now has allowed him to decide to ride out several forms of cancer, rather than accept the surgical/ chemo model. With guidance from a Chinese healer, he is doing well after two and a half years living with two cancers. A quote from him-- "Life is now trying to minimize my ego, enhancing to my intuitive self. I honor meaning as coming from my intuitive self. ...I feel freer, have a sense of wisdom, insight and confidence. In working with my students I find I seem to say the right thing at the right time, not really knowing how I know that. I feel a connecting with people that I never connected with before...Energywise, I have more energy, soul energy,

spiritual energy." He uses a tennis metaphor to further describe this phenomenon. "When you are an old tennis player you do not run back and forth as much, but you seem to be right where the ball is to make the play."

In terms of his spirituality he offers "that there are sharp boundaries in each religion, but in my spirituality there are more undefined levels." He stressed that he relates to a higher power without defining it; has a fascination with mysticism and a connection to the cosmos.

And now I guess I should stop, in the words of the guest on Bill Maher's show, and take a nap!
(humor)

Thank you Rev. Judy for the sermon workshops and....Thank you all for letting me share my thoughts... Let us have more dialogue together to explore the depths of this new gift, to plum our wisdom, our joys, as well as our struggles, in this new stage of life.